

SAILING family-style

*Our writer finds
the perfect
vacation for her
family of
four aboard
a cruise ship.*



By Beth Blair

My family of four carefully scaled the steep steps to Altun Ha's Temple of the Green Tomb in Belize. Once on top, I watched my kids squint in the bright Belizean sun as they scanned the ancient Mayan ruins scattered throughout the plaza. Pointing, they both said, "Look at that one!" Across the way stood the tallest of the group, the Temple of the Masonry Altars.

Suddenly, my son said, "I can't wait to tell my teacher I came here!" My daughter chimed in, "Me, too!" In that moment, the wait for the tender from the cruise ship to the mainland, the hour-long van ride and the challenging climb in the heat were all worth it. My children's dream of visiting Mayan ruins had come true.

When I first approached my family about taking a weeklong tropical cruise, my daughter asked, "Will there be a swimming pool onboard?" I smiled. Little did she know that there would be two pools and so much more to do. While I've certainly been on my share of cruises, including an Alaskan land-cruise tour with my mother and a sunny, fitness-inspired Western Caribbean experience with my sister, cruising family-style with my husband, Jeff, and children, Jeb, 10, and Maddie, 9, aboard the *Carnival Magic* was a much different experience.

After settling into our stateroom on the first day, we explored the ship by creating our own scavenger hunt. With a ship map in hand, we found the water slides, restaurants and surprises such as an espresso bar and a foosball table by the Irish pub. The truth was, I wanted to ensure that the kids learned the ship and could find their way around in case they got lost, but the joke was on me. Within 24 hours, while I was still confused about which direction was aft, both kids had the entire ship mapped out in their minds. They also had their favorite locations picked out. My son quickly found his happy place in the basketball and soccer venues, while my daughter was content browsing the boutiques.

One of the first games we played as a family was outdoor miniature golf—that was, until our ship encountered a windy rainstorm, prompting all outdoor activities to be closed. At that point, we urged Jeb and Maddie to try the onboard kids' club. Adding lots of kid-friendly entertainment—from kid camps to popular kids' characters—has been one of the best moves cruise lines have made in recent years. For example, aboard some Carnival ships, the Seuss at Sea program draws in youth with themed amusements that include appearances by The Cat in the Hat, Thing 1 and Thing 2, and Sam I Am as well as green eggs and ham for breakfast. Disney Cruise Line passengers have opportunities to meet classic characters such as Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Peter Pan, Captain Hook, Tinker Bell and the princesses. Royal Caribbean has



The rock-climbing wall on Royal Caribbean ships is a favorite of kids.



COURTESY OF ROYAL CARIBBEAN INTERNATIONAL

Royal Caribbean International's *Allure of the Seas* features the DreamWorks experience, with characters such as Alex the Lion (above) from the movie *Madagascar*.

teamed with DreamWorks Animation to present themed experiences aboard its ships with characters familiar from *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, *Kung Fu Panda* and *How to Train Your Dragon*. Every time my kids saw a character, they would run toward the “celebrity” and shout, “Mom, take a picture!”

It didn’t take long for Jeb and Maddie to become fans of the kids’ club—and not just because of video games and dance parties; they also quickly made friends. They spent the remainder of the cruise asking to visit the club or meet up with their buddies at the pool, for a game of basketball or to see the kid-friendly comedy show. What was especially nice for all of us was that having a place for the kids to hang out in the evening meant they avoided specialty restaurants that my husband and I enjoy dining at so much. In other words, date night! “I’m so happy we don’t have to sit through some boring meal,” Jeb said at one point as his sister nodded in agreement.

When the storm lifted, Jeff and I were looking forward to relaxing in the sun before our port days. After slathering on sunscreen, Jeb and Maddie hit the water slides for hours on end, only breaking for lunch. At one point, the pair rushed past us and Maddie said, “This is the best vacation ever!”

Nothing satisfies me more than watching my children enjoy themselves. But as I learned that week, what’s even better is watching them conquer their fears. The most memorable moment happened on the ropes course. With nothing but water on the horizon, Jeb and Maddie looked leery as they donned their harnesses. Once they were fastened in, they teetered 15 feet overhead, taking one step at a time as they made their way across the narrow bridge. When they finished the course, they were beaming and begging to do it again.

On our last day, none of us wanted to disembark from the cruise ship. My dream had come true: we had finally found the perfect family vacation. ■

COURTESY OF CARIBBEAN CRUISE LINES



Families can challenge the Sea Course aboard the *Carnival Magic*.

Family FOCUSED

Watch out, theme parks. You have competition from the cruise lines.

Today’s megaships are a wonderland of zip lines, climbing walls, water slides, miniature golf courses, ropes courses, swimming pools, bowling alleys, surfing simulators, ice skating rinks and sports courts. Cruise lines’ youth programs not only feature video games, dance parties and movies, but they also provide the opportunity for kids to meet other kids to hang out with. (And both Royal Caribbean and Disney offer infant and toddler nurseries.)

When the time comes to allow the kids to roam the ship on their own, you can take advantage of onboard communication options. For example, Royal Caribbean rents Royal Connect Phones (\$30/cruise) for onboard communication, while Disney provides Wave Phones (complimentary) to guests.

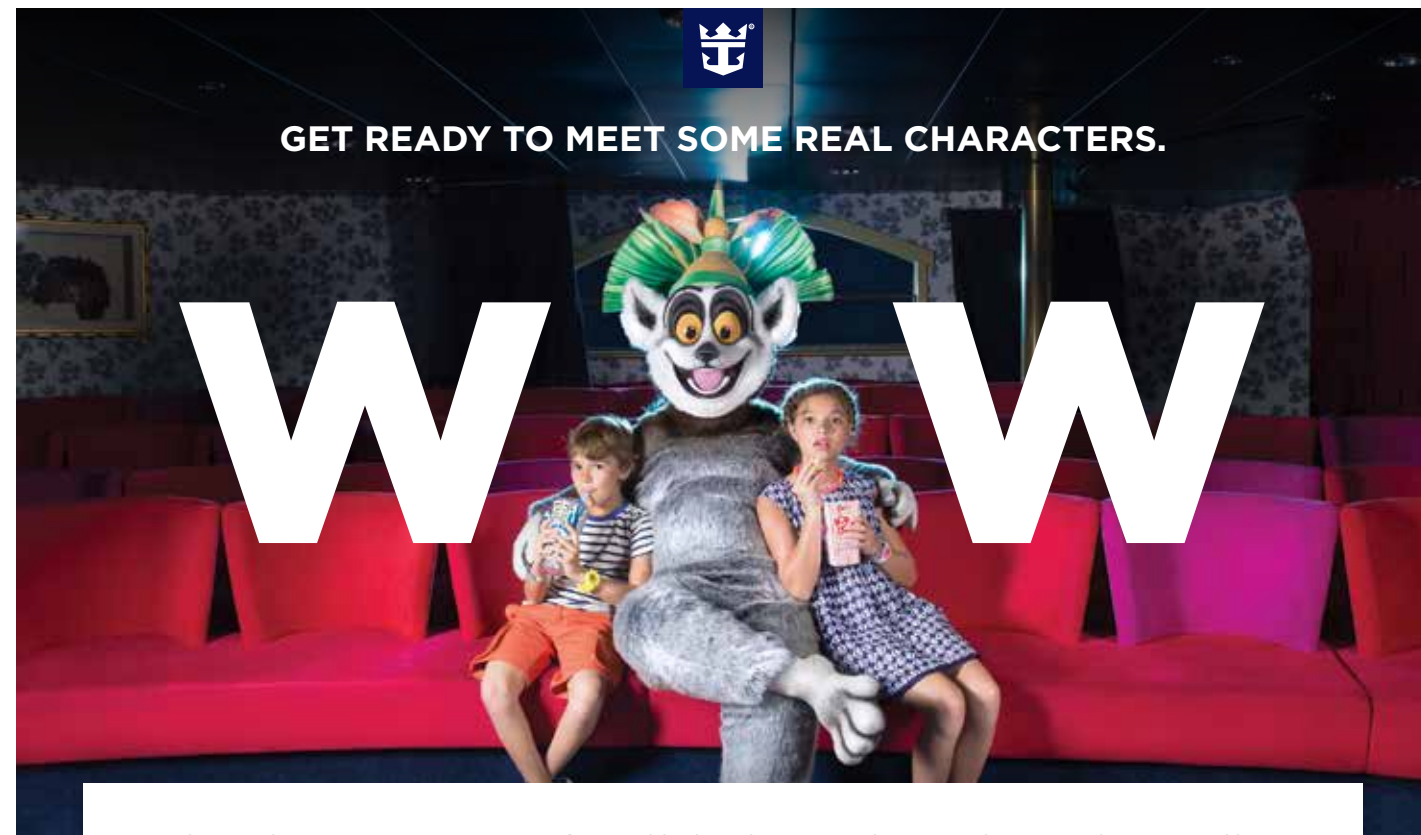
Onboard family activities include Princess Cruises’ Jr.CHEF@Sea Program in which young people don chef aprons and mini-toques for behind-the-scenes culinary lessons.

Cruising means a bevy of food choices for everyone, from the pickiest tots to stubborn teenagers. Some ships even provide dinner entertainment including magicians and music or experiences such as Disney’s new “Drawn to Magic” show at its Animator’s Palate dining room.

Cruise lines such as Royal Caribbean International have included larger staterooms and suites that sleep 6, 8 and 10 passengers as well as traditional staterooms with hotel-style connecting doors.

Talk to your AAA travel agent about which cruise line and ships will best suit your family. Then get out on the high seas together!

—Beth Blair



Nothing makes a vacation even more unforgettable than sharing it with some truly animated company—like your favorite DreamWorks characters. Share pancakes with Shrek. Pose for pictures with Alex the lion. And watch Toothless the dragon in a dazzling ice show. There are tons of ways for you and your family to make memories with all your favorite characters from Shrek, Madagascar, Kung Fu Panda, How To Train Your Dragon and more as you visit some of the most incredible destinations in the world. Only on Royal Caribbean.

Book with AAA Travel between January 1 – February 28, 2015 on select ships featuring the DreamWorks Experience for sailings April 1 – December 31, 2015 and enjoy the Exclusive AAA DreamWorks Package:

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